

## THE TYRANNY OF CULTURE: MODERN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENTS IN THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

If educationists are weary of being told, mostly by their colleagues, that Australian education is in a mess,<sup>1</sup> those involved in foreign language education are surely even wearier of the "sinking ship" atmosphere pervading their field. Discussion of the problem often revolves around the difficulties of attracting learners in a society where monocultural attitudes predominate and where most importance is attached to the study of "cash-value" subjects believed to provide a career. Thus the majority of contributions to the discussion understandably involves either methodological changes which will attract and hold learners, or efforts to demonstrate the cultural and vocational benefits of languages, or both.

The following contribution proceeds from the view that the concept of culture which has dominated most university language departments has been biased, narrowing and ultimately damaging to the study of languages at all levels, to the point where language courses fail to interest both the general and the academic communities. Whereas studies in university language departments were once viewed as being of broad general concern to all educated people they are now seen rather as being of interest only to a few very specialised students and scholars.

Two major and closely related changes, perhaps well known, but not always seen as being linked with the situation facing language and other "traditional" Arts departments, are especially important. First, the democratisation of education has meant not only mass enrolments at Australian universities since the 'fifties, but also at least some change in the socioeconomic background of students<sup>2</sup>. This may not yet involve, as Slamowicz et. al.<sup>3</sup> have indicated, large sections of the lower socioeconomic groups (formerly called the working classes) but must certainly include at least a growing proportion of the lower middle classes, the children of clerks, tradesmen and the like, and even, in view of the mounting interest in continuing education, those same clerks, tradesmen and their wives! The abolition of fees undoubtedly gave this process some impetus. Those students seeking entry to universities until the recent past have shared a common cultural consciousness, hence courses designed on traditional, indeed, what might be called post or even neo-classical models, posed no problem. This homogeneity no longer exists, but as a matter of democratic justice the five

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year high school and hence the university must be open to all who meet the legal requirements. Language departments appear on the whole to have resisted acknowledging this kind of change and have continued making assumptions which are no longer valid, about the kind of students they are receiving. Second, the rise of the social sciences within the Faculties of Arts in Australian universities has set new norms for enrolment numbers, norms which most traditional Arts departments could never achieve. The per capita distribution of funds has been both financially and morally debilitating for such departments, prompting the uncomfortable suspicion amongst both staff and students that departments which cannot meet these norms have, at best, somewhat dubious goods on offer.

It will not do to simply disparage the growth of social science departments on the grounds that because they are more applied they are somehow less academic. A glance at the publications list of those departments compared with those of, say, French, Russian or German would show that if academic leadership is defined in terms of public importance and impact, to say nothing of sheer quantity, then the "traditional" departments have lost it. Those departments at which one sometimes casts an envious glance usually combine a vigorous postgraduate programme with a solid preparation towards community-oriented careers which demand sensitive, well-educated professionals.

In contrast, the claim of one university language department that "vocational interests are taken into account in the design of all courses" sets one wondering for what possible vocation a literature-grammar-translation course could possibly be a preparation. Certainly not for schoolteaching, unless there exists a serious misunderstanding about what is being done in schools today. Yet it is difficult to imagine what other vocations such a course could lead to. Students taking language majors are encouraged to believe that their language studies will assist them vocationally. It remains, however, for language departments to so structure their studies that these touching beliefs begin to assume a semblance of truth. The bleak alternative is for these departments to become "an intellectual foundlings' home, a refuge for orphaned ideas and facts no-one else wants to know."<sup>4</sup>

The solution certainly does not lie in channelling the "pure" students into the universities and the "ap-

plied" students into the C.A.E.'s. The Martin Report may have hinted at this possibility when it noted that some students might be better served in institutions "offering courses of different orientation and less exacting academically",<sup>5</sup> but C.A.E. enrolments are still only about half of those in universities. And as long as tertiary institutions compete for federal funds the universities will not willingly lose students to other institutions. The idea that "applied" students could be packed off to the C.A.E.'s has proved a will o' the wisp, fortunately for the very survival of departments such as French or German. Without these students such departments would be in a very sorry state indeed, both financially and academically. Academically, because even the most brilliant research scholar must have library grants, research grants, conference grants, within an adequately financed and sufficiently staffed department. This point cannot be too strongly stressed for those who believe that "academic" departments would be better off with just a few gifted and devoted students, rather than having to carry a larger number of less-than-scholarly, career-minded students. The latter pay for the former and no department can even contemplate losing them. At the same time let us hasten to add that we are not advocating any abdication of academic responsibility on the part of language departments. We are certainly not suggesting that language departments become some sort of community Berlitz schools, even if they were able to, nor that they should bow to any popular trends and fads in the hope of attracting students. A university must be a place where independent research and teaching may be carried out in a spirit of objectivity, without reference to the market place. We do see, however, an urgent need for a process of negotiation between the department and its students, negotiation during which attention is paid both to an objective, independent tradition of teaching and research, as well as to the real needs expressed by students rather than the imagined needs projected by staff. The staff must bring their expertise to bear on the negotiations and, of course, take account of the range of skills they can make available, but this does not mean that the models of studies they offer at present must be imposed on students in the belief that these are the only models possible.

A major factor in the decline of language departments is their isolation, not only from the general community, but also from the academic community. Bostock<sup>6</sup> has pointed out that the concentration of language departments on the aesthetic aspects of imaginative literature has effectively shut out students from other disciplines. Such students may have an interest in French or German in relation to their own disciplines, but because language department programmes concentrate on literary scholarship, find that their special requirements are not even considered to come within the scope of the

"proper" concerns of a language department. Bostock notes ruefully that graduates in non-language departments are thus overwhelmingly unaware of foreign languages.<sup>7</sup>

This situation is surely a distortion of the very idea of a university, which should be constantly striving to open its studies to and forge new links with the whole of the academic community. Students in other disciplines should be able to negotiate a course of study which accommodates their requirements. The narrowness of interests mentioned above is a major factor in the self-destruction of language departments, and it is this, rather than the alleged monoculturalism of Australians which is thrusting language departments into an increasingly anachronistic and weakening position. A broadening of studies could help to meet the demand for career relevance, a demand which usually embarrasses language departments. Such a move would enable language departments to re-establish themselves as a fully integrated part of the university community, rather than remain an esoteric luxury.

Our university modern language departments appear ultimately to have derived their models from the earlier studies in classical languages at leading institutions such as Oxford. At the time of the early Renaissance scholars were concerned with the whole body of rediscovered classical writings, including medicine, law, philosophy, natural science and imaginative literature. With the advent of scientists such as Galileo, Copernicus and Newton, and cataclysmic social upheavals such as the French Revolution, the scientific and technical writings gradually lost their validity. Although the classical languages were still important to the educated, attention came to be focussed on those writings less likely to become outdated and was concentrated ultimately on imaginative literature and philology. These in turn provided authoritative models for modern language studies, models which essentially prevail today.<sup>8</sup>

Our point, then, is to suggest that modern language departments did not at some earlier stage consciously commence the study of literature, but rather, inherited too uncritically the classical model. This is not to say that literary studies are somehow illegitimate but merely to put the matter into perspective. The adjective "German", "French", "Russian" etc. in the title "Department of . . ." is automatically assumed to be followed by the ellipsed noun "Literature" and all other activities within these departments are, in greater or lesser measure, subservient to literary studies. "Civilisation" courses are seen as a background to literary study, language teaching is seen essentially as a preparation for reading texts; mediaeval studies are taught from literary texts, even beginners' courses frequently include examinable literary texts. The

only other possible avenue in these departments, for students not inclined to literary study is philological/linguistic studies.

A healthy survival instinct might lead modern language departments to become more client-conscious in an increasingly cost-and-accountability-conscious age. They might begin to identify and realistically monitor their functions in relation to varying clienteles, actual and potential, instead of assuming that all students must benefit from courses intended for literary/philological specialists. Language department staffs are in danger of being regarded as irresponsible high priests of an inaccessible cult, rather than as contributors to the understanding of great cultures, which is surely how they would rather be seen. Canute was determined but mistaken, and the grim financial facts of recent and future years can only make it so much clearer that the public, represented by the official purse-string holders, may agree to subsidise the kind of activity presently undertaken in language departments in no more than a very limited and ever-decreasing measure, because language studies, as they now operate, are of limited and decreasing interest, even to an educated public.

If this is to be rectified, language teachers will need to begin constructing models of courses not only radically different in content, but also in intent, from the present courses, and language departments at universities will need to begin to employ staff who can teach within these models. Modern studies of other cultures are of a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary nature and the failure of language departments to acknowledge this has resulted in seemingly "unpredictable" developments overtaking departments at a cautionary rate.

An exemplary case study is that of the German Department in the University of Queensland, following the change from the term to the semester-system in 1974. The Department converted its standard monolithic first, second and third year courses into multiple, optional single-semester units. Significantly, when client choice is allowed free expression it is being found that although overall enrolments remain fairly stable, literature courses are coming dangerously close to extinction because of negligible enrolments, while language and civilisation courses are almost unmanageable because of their size. In the light of this experience traditionally-oriented language departments may (or may not!) care to contemplate what their fate would be, if they suddenly made the literature component of their courses completely optional.

In the face of the well-documented<sup>9</sup> and painfully familiar decline of interest in foreign-language

studies it must be concluded that either attractive material is being badly presented, or that the material itself is unattractive, or that the cause lies in between. Language teachers need to be able to perceive their own motives in this situation and recognise the extent to which their vested interests colour their defence of their courses. Why, if language courses are of such fundamental importance apart from their instrumental value, has there been no public outcry against the demise of Latin and Greek, especially in schools? One has the uncomfortable feeling that while teachers of modern languages may be prepared to pay lip-service to the importance of classical languages, they are privately prepared to let them languish, as long as their 'own' languages are supported.

Foreign language studies will be able to regain their proper place in the academic community only when the "Cultural History" and "Civilization" courses cease merely to be peripheral or incidental to literary study and become the course in a foreign language department. In other words, the course offered will need to be a total course entitled "The culture and civilisation of . . ." or similar, under which title a number of more or less equally ranked studies are subsumed, e.g. art, musicology, philosophy, history, literature, economics, politics, geography, law and the social organisation of education, health, labour, social security and housing. Such studies would aim to span the totality of the given culture, past and present. Students could then view the society within which an idiosyncratic work of literature, art, music and so forth was created, and the special focal study undertaken could then be properly seen as an integral part of a complex whole.

From this perspective it can be seen that the traditional concentration on literary analysis is indeed arbitrary. It may be difficult for language teachers educated in a traditional literature department (as indeed the writers have been) to accept that literature is not a central, nor yet a peripheral interest, even in an educated community, including universities. It is not just a question of the difficulty of reading texts in a foreign language, because Australian Departments of English too have been affected by some of the phenomena described above, and the appearance of more linguistics and "expression and communication" is not accidental. The serious novel may have been read by a wide spectrum of social classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but it is now read and certainly discussed almost exclusively by members of university literature departments. This is not to say that other people don't read important and serious literature on, say, ecology and animal behaviour, but the role of literary genres such as the novel and

the lyric poem has become sharply reduced in our society.

Literature and its study need absolutely no defence whatever; both hold a vital and unassailable position in the spiritual life of mankind, and language departments are in the best situation to offer literary studies to students who desire them. What is argued here, is that language departments should begin to develop area studies to cater to the broader interests of the academic community, precisely because these departments are best equipped to act as mediators between our own and the given foreign culture. Such developments would indeed make considerable demands upon many modern language departments in their present form. It would, for example, require them to collaborate more closely with other departments within the university, although the responsibility for integration of studies would remain with the language departments. It is naturally desirable that each department should try to offer a wide range of studies, within the well-known framework of scarce means and unlimited ends. It will thus be necessary to build up known areas of strength in each department, rather than have each department trying to offer impossibly broad programmes. This implies a greater willingness on the part of each department to recommend to students the possibility of study in a department outside their state in order to pursue the particular area of studies they have chosen. As Partridge observes:

We do not want to encourage wasteful rivalry and dispersion of funds for the sake of satisfying desires for greater status or prestige.<sup>10</sup>

and further:

It would be a significant contribution to the planning of Australian tertiary education if governmental encouragement and financial support could be provided to enable Australian students to travel much more frequently than they do now to appropriate institutions beyond the borders of their own state.<sup>11</sup>

The contextualised studies envisaged would permit students to gain a more meaningful and comprehensive insight into societal fabrics, enabling them to perceive what to live or have lived in another cultural context means or meant. The skills involved in developing such perspectives are surely as important as the necessarily restricted contents selected. Perceiving a section of this other world should then involve the student in understanding the nature of culture, in achieving a fuller understanding of his own cultural background and in reducing his own hitherto distorting cultural bondage. Surely, any of these aims would be sufficient justification for such studies at the university.

We should perhaps stress that such studies are in no way to be regarded as a soft option, a sort of diluted university programme for the newly emergent "less-than-academics". Justification for any studies at university can rarely, if ever, be judged solely in terms of content. Indeed it is precisely when some rather pressured courses presently offered in universities concentrate on structural and lexical acquisition, in which a series of rather neutral foreign language equivalents to English form the basis of language programmes, often using high-school books, that serious questions might be raised concerning their acceptability within a university department. According to Fries:

To deal with the culture and life of a people is not just an adjunct of a practical language course, something alien and apart from its main purpose, to be added or not as time and convenience may allow, but as an essential feature of every stage of language learning.<sup>12</sup>

In the proposed model, language and literature would figure only as components, albeit important, and, in some cases, even major components in foreign studies. But the aim should essentially be to take some aspect or period of those studies and provide students not only with relevant facts and observations but also with critical awarenesses concerning the ways in which such information may be gathered, assembled and evaluated, in short, research skills necessary for the construction of a comprehensive perspective. This would enable us to join with students in examining, say, the West German Wirtschaftswunder from a range of perspectives, including the economic, historical, political, sociological as well as the literary. Language skills would be purposefully developed and enlarged in specified ways, that is, language would be taught for specific purposes, on the model of Science language courses. If, for example, we are teaching language to literature students, specific language courses for literature must be offered, courses which will hardly provide a lexical framework for students who wish to become teachers or diplomats. Such people are not best served, as some departmental programmes seem to assume, by language for literature or language courses which are neutral in lexical content and register. The concept of threshold levels proposed by the Council of Europe, followed by post-threshold specialised courses, may be one which we must consider in the near future. We may also have to discard the three-year drip-feed method and investigate the feasibility of teaching to the threshold level in conjunction with Language Centres which will have a larger role in departmental life. In this way language departments may be able to cease trying to convince students how useful languages **might** be; by taking a special strand students may be sure that the target language is there for special purposes.

Progressively, advanced foreign studies might then ensure that an in-depth study of whatever focus would not fail to account for the broader cultural and institutional setting in which it occurs. Comparative awarenesses could be made explicit aims of such studies and could be developed intra- as well as inter- culturally, temporally as well as spatially. The departure point for such studies might vary; it might, for example, be political rather than literary, the present rather than the past, Austria rather than Germany, provincial rather than Parisian. It is important, however, that we ensure that whatever the initial perspective, it comes to be seen as an integral part of a more complex whole, the most advanced studies of which would require a battery of inquiry skills drawing upon and confining a range of disciplinary perspectives. Initial topics would be chosen with at least some reference to their potential for leading into and developing more general perspectives. Such integration could help to safeguard against texts being seen as arbitrary and hence unplanned in relation to language development programmes or as pretentious in that they form a kind of specialised addenda to a generalised language learning approach. More importantly, except for the philologist, language would come to be seen as a tool for something beyond itself. In this respect it may be seen that the implementation of the principles outlined here, without being specifically vocational, would nevertheless ensure that each student could develop a more vocation-oriented profile of studies than the traditional courses concentrating on literary scholarship have permitted to date. Moreover, such studies should provide students with a more flexible range of perspectives of 'use' in their private as well as their occupational lives. Modern language studies would then achieve their more proper broader aims, and the tyranny of the traditional improper understanding of 'culture' would be reduced accordingly.

Let us stress that we are in no way suggesting that the university abandon its cultural role for a purely instrumental role. The university remains for the foreseeable future perhaps the last resort where pure inquiry may take place in a spirit of independence, and the "philosophically" based departments must continue to educate towards a liberal culture, free of economic, political and social demands. At the same time, they are doing everyone a grave disservice by attempting to ignore or disparage the students' own desires and interests. Accountability and flexibility, realistically based on current and projected staff levels are vital to the future of all "traditional" university departments but to none more so than departments of modern languages.

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## STUDENT PARENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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The past decade has seen a steady rise in the proportion of students aged 25 or more (from 22% to 30%) and in the proportion of women students (from 30% to 36%).<sup>1</sup> In addition to these well-documented changes the proportion of parents, especially mothers, seems to be rising also.

A variety of factors may have contributed to the appearance of parents on university campuses. There have been some changes in the policies affecting tertiary institutions (e.g. the introduction of the N.E.A.T. scheme in 1973 and the abolition of tertiary fees in 1974) and in the re-employment policies of the Victorian Education Department. It is difficult to assess the impact of these factors since research into any of them is either incomplete or non-existent. Initial reports on the effects of fee abolition<sup>2</sup> suggest that it has made almost no difference to the overall composition of the university student population. Insufficient time may have elapsed for any such effects to appear but it seems likely to be minimal, since tuition fees are only a small part of the costs to the individual of a university education and children from the very poor segments of the community leave secondary school before the final year. The N.E.A.T. scheme was a response to the rising numbers of parents returning to study<sup>3</sup> but its subsequent effect is unknown. No research into the effects of the Victorian Education Department's re-employment policies has been conducted.

Changes to the regulations of various educational institutions have probably had less impact on the composition of the university student population than the major social changes occurring outside them. The average family size has fallen and child-bearing is completed by a younger age now than it was twenty years ago.<sup>4</sup> These comparatively young mothers may then wish to begin or return to tertiary studies. The pressures on them to remain at home with young children have relaxed to some extent so that they may feel able to undertake tertiary studies even before their children begin school.<sup>5</sup> The coincidence of a decline in the average age at which people first become parents with an increase in the average length of years of education may have produced a number of students who begin families before graduating. More young single mothers are keeping their children<sup>6</sup> and these women may be strongly motivated to acquire professional qualifications in order to support themselves and their children. As

single mothers are comparatively rare in the population it is unlikely that this change in social practices would have had a major impact on the composition of the university student body.

Several issues have already arisen concerning the provision of care for the children of student parents. Federal and State policies on child-care provide for the establishment of neighbourhood centres to accommodate all those children living in the area.<sup>7</sup> Very few of these centres have yet been constructed<sup>7</sup> so many parents have to travel considerable distances to reach one and compete with full-time working parents for scarce places. If the parents work or study in suburbs remote from where they live, neighbourhood centres can involve them in arduous journeys, anxiety over the welfare of their distant children and unnecessary curtailment of breast feeding for infants. The provision of on-campus child-care has been advocated<sup>8</sup> in order to reduce the amount of travel and to provide good care at subsidized prices for students who may be unable to afford the rates charged at neighbourhood centres. However, on-campus child-care is not a student service receiving high priority in the funding allocations of Australian universities. Even when the need is recognized and centres established, few universities have provided direct grants,<sup>9</sup> although some have offered premises at nominal rents. The necessary funds have been obtained by the formation of co-operatives and limited companies among the parents.

Establishing an effective university child-care service can be seriously hampered by difficulty in determining the extent of the need. No Australian university asks questions about the number of students' dependent children and only 20% record marital status. These items are omitted on the grounds that students might find them "intrusive". As most Australian universities ask their students questions about age and national background, both of which are seen as intrusive by many people, their reluctance to ask about parenthood responsibilities seems difficult to accept on these grounds. The absence of these data has had serious consequences for child-care planning, as no university can know whether a creche is needed. There remain, in addition, questions about the effect of family formation on choice of course, graduate status and academic performance which cannot be investigated adequately.